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Leibniz's Concept of Unity and its Aristotelian Origins

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Abstract. *Unity is beyond any doubt one of the most central concepts of Leibniz's metaphysics. Although mostly connected by interpreters with a Platonic perspective (immaterial principles of true unity versus atomism), Leibniz's theory of unity, in particular in the concept of unum per se, has strong Aristotelian roots, and Aristotelian texts and commentaries may be considered to represent a model for his treatment.*

Unity is, beyond any doubt, one of the most central concepts of Leibniz's metaphysics. It is mostly connected by interpreters with a Platonic perspective. And really, the opposition between immaterial principles of true unity and atomism is mostly pictured by Leibniz himself as a choice between Plato and Democritus. Surely the One, the monadic Unit, is a very Platonic principle:

“Nam ternarius et quaternarius et unusquisque numerorum unitas quedam est. Monas quidem enim non sit, omnino autem unitas est; species enim est. Species autem unitate semper participat; ipsa enim unificativa est partium. [...] Omnia igitur participant aliquo uno, quare et propter hoc venerabilissimum esse videtur le unum”¹.

The identification of *unum* et *ens*, contrarily, is a trait proper to the Aristotelian tradition, and considered as its basic dividing element from the Platonic heritage by a qualified witness as Pico della Mirandola:

“Aristoteles multis in locis respondere haec sibi invicem et aequali esse ambitu dicit, unum scilicet et ens, verum item et bonum, sed *de his postea*. Resistit

1 *Procli in Platonis Parmenidem Commentaria*, ed. di Carlos Steel e Leen van Campe, Libri VII finis ex interpretatione Guillelmi, vol. III, pp. 320–21 (510, 23–24). One may also quote the widespread sentence “Deus est monas monadem gignens, in se unum reflectens ardorem” (*Liber Viginti Quattuor Philosophorum*, cura et studio F. Hudry, Hermes latinus III,1, Turnhout, Brepols, 1997, Def. I, p. 5).

Academia cui placet unum esse prius ente, prius autem cum dicunt et simplicius intelligi volunt et communius”².

Leibniz shares openly the Aristotelian view, about which he writes to Arnauld that he holds the identity of *un* and *être* to be an axiom:

“je tiens pour un axiome cette proposition identique, qui n’est diversifiée que par l’accent: savoir que ce qui n’est pas véritablement UN estre, n’est pas non plus véritablement un ESTRE. On a tousjours crû que l’un et l’estre sont des choses reciproques” (A II 2, 186).

But it is well known that, alongside with his insistence on the principle *ens et unum convertuntur*, there are also other important Aristotelian themes in Leibniz’s theory of the unity. First and foremost its key concept of *unum per se* comes to the mind, then the quasi-identification of *vita*, *unitas*, *entelechia*; the principle *essentiae rerum sunt sicut numeri* should be mentioned as well³.

Let us start from this last one: ‘*Essentiae rerum sunt sicut numeri*’, which appears both in the *Disputatio de principio individui* and in the *Theodicy*, and many times in-between. It is considered by many interpreters a Pythagorean-Platonic utterance, and is found more than once in Weigel’s works. But in reality it concerns numbers only marginally and, moreover, its origins are all except Pythagorean, and only remotely Platonic. Originally it is indeed anti-Pythagorean, and belongs in fact to the Aristotelian tradition: “dicendum est quod formae substantiales se habent ad invicem sicut numeri, ut dicitur in Octavo Metaphysicae”⁴.

Aristotle declares in fact that just like numbers mutate by addition or subtraction, even of a single unity, so any definition or essence is changed into another when whichever single predicate is added or removed. It is also Leibniz’s prevailing notion of the similarity between numbers and essences:

“*Essentiae rerum sunt ut numeri. Duo numeri non sunt aequales inter se, ita duae essentiae non sunt aequae perfectae*” (A VI 4, 1352).

Alexander, f.i., is a complete being to whom an individual essence corresponds in a possible world: and in truth, when God’s intellect mutates anything in it, that particular Alexander becomes another individual—like it is for numbers.

2 Pico della Mirandola, *De Ente et Uno*, cap. I, *Opera omnia Ioannis Pici*, Basileae, ex officina Henricpetrina, 1572, I, p. 241. Cf. respectively Aquinas, *Quodl.*, VI, q. 1 co.: “unumquodque in quantum est unum, in tantum est ens; unde ens et unum convertuntur [...] et unumquodque per suam formam habet unitatem”; and *Met.*, V, 6, 1015b15.

3 We shall here ignore the Scholastics’ concept of *species specialissima*, which nevertheless had an important developmental role for Leibniz’s reflections of the first ’80s—analogue to the role played by Aquinas’ theory of the unicity of angels in providing a model for Leibnizian individual substances and their being each one its own species: “Il [s’ensuivent de cela] plusieurs paradoxes considerables, comme entre autres qu’il n’est pas vray, que deux substances se ressemblent entierement et soyent differentes *solo numero*, et que ce que S. Thomas assure sur ce point des anges ou intelligences (*quod ibi omne individuum sit species infima*) est vray de toutes les substances, pourveu qu’on prenne la difference specifique, comme la prennent les Geometres à l’égard de leur figures” (DM §9; A VI 4, 1541).

4 Thomas Aquinas, *Quodl.* I, q. 4 art. 1 co. See my *Mathematical Similes in the Theodicy*, in A.A.VV., *Reasons in Theodicy. Logic, Metaphysics and Theology in Leibniz’s Essais de Théodicée (1710)*, a cura di M. Favaretti Camposampiero - L. Perissinotto, Frankfurt, Ontos Verlag, in print.

As for essences, for most Aristotelians they are plainly not the same kind of individual essences that Leibniz is interested in since his maturity, but they are principles of unity and completeness anyway, particularly when concerning the unity of substances. Aquinas writes:

“sicut forma substantialis non habet per se esse absolutum sine eo cui advenit, ita nec illud cui advenit, scilicet materia. Et ideo ex coniunctione utriusque relinquatur illud esse, in quo res per se subsistit, et ex eis efficitur unum per se; propter quod ex coniunctione eorum relinquatur essentia quaedam. Unde forma, quamvis in se considerata non habeat completam rationem essentiae, tamen est pars essentiae completae”⁵.

In the Scholastic writings that are familiar to him, *unum per se* is a quite generic expression. F.i. we may find discussions of which predicates make a *unum per se* (animal and biped, since they are genus and difference); and more in general, *unum per se* may be found in definitions between *definiens* et *definiendum*. Of course, a discussion centered on the concept of “unum per se” can also concerns the conjunction of form and matter in the substance. But it is Leibniz, who qualifies it so markedly as a term nearly exclusive to substance theory. This could be, in the end, a meaningful symptom, a hint to better define his relation to Aristotelism.

Unum per se is commonly used by Leibniz as a definition of the real unity of simple beings. Truly one, *vere unum*, is the same as *unum per se*; bodies have their unity *per alium*; heaps have accidental unity; rainbows have imaginary (perceptual) unity. Thus, no real or true entity without real or true unity. It seems so simple that it might be called the Queibniz Law: no entity without identity, no identity without unity.

The identification between really existing individuals with an identity and the possession of a strong kind of unity is indeed Aristotelian: “Ex hoc autem [Philosophus] ulterius concludit, quod identitas est unitas vel unio”⁶. The same concept is easily found in Suarez:

“Aristoteles, VII *Metaph.*, text. 43, et clarius lib. VIII, text. 15, et lib. II *De Anima*, text. 7, illud significat esse ens per se unum, quod vel *simplex* est, vel ex potentia substantiali et proprio actu componitur. [...] Ex quibus intelligere licet illud appellari in ratione entis ens per se, quod est per se unum; illud autem per accidens, quod tantum per accidens unum est” (DM 4, 3, 3).

We patently recognize here possible sources of typical Leibnizian arguments. The ultimate originator is Aristotle⁷, but Leibniz clearly has in mind late medieval and

5 *De ente et essentia*, 5. Nearly the same in Suarez: “Cum enim neque materia neque forma per se sint entia completa et integra in suo genere, sed ad illud componendum natura sua institutae sint, merito illud quod ex eis proxime componitur, essentia et natura per se una dicitur et est” (DM 4, 3, 8).

6 Aquinas, *Sent. Met.*, lib. 5 l. 11 n. 7.

7 *Metaph.* V, 6 up to V, 11. “Nevertheless, [Leibniz’s] distinction between *unum per accidens* and *unum per se* is not entirely the same as in Aristotle. A pile of stones constitutes a *unum per se* for Aristotle even though it is the lowest possible form of unity” (Gottfried Martin, *Leibniz. Logic and Metaphysics*, Engl. transl., Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1964, p. 115). Compare the following synthesis by Aquinas in his commentary to *Metaph.* V, 11: “Omnes enim modi quibus aliqua unum per se dicuntur, reducuntur ad duo: quorum unus est secundum quod dicuntur unum illa, quorum materia est una [...] Alio modo dicuntur unum, quorum substantia est una: vel ratione

modern treatments⁸. Suarez again offers a model for a connection between essence, complete substance and unity, that is not so far from certain Leibnizian treatments:

The already mentioned convertibility of ‘being’ and ‘one’ has a clear connection to this *unum per se* business:

“ita se habent unum et ens, quod praedicantur per se et non secundum accidens de substantia cuiuslibet rei. Substantia enim cuiuslibet rei est unum per se et non secundum accidens. Ens ergo et unum significant idem secundum rem”⁹.

Leibniz is sometimes keen to extend the value of beyond true unity: “Ens et unum convertuntur, sed ut datur Ens per aggregationem, ita et unum, etsi haec Entitas Unitasque sit semimentalis”¹⁰. It is interesting that another most Platonist Aristotelian, that is Avicenna, did not agree with this vision: “Jam enim ostendimus quod unitas non est intrans in diffinitione substantie nec accidentis: sed fortasse est comitans eam”¹¹. Aquinas discusses it again in the *Commentary to the Sentences*:

“Avicenna enim dicit, quod unum quod convertitur cum ente, est idem quod unum quod est principium numeri; et multitudo quae est numerus, est idem quod multitudo quae dividit ens; et sic vult quod utrumque aliquid positive addat supra ea quibus adjungitur. [...] Alii philosophi, scilicet Aristoteles et Averroes, dicunt, quod unum et multa quae dividunt ens, non sunt idem cum uno quod est species quantitatis. Et hoc rationabile est. [...] Unde dicunt, quod unum claudit in intellectu suo ens commune, et addit rationem privationis vel negationis cujusdam super ens, idest indivisionis. Unde ens et unum convertuntur, sicut quae sunt idem re”¹².

Also *Ens* and *Verum*¹³, and all them and *Bonum*¹⁴, *convertuntur*, concerning the latter, Leibniz had annotated from Fogel’s *Lexicum philosophicum*, that “Bonum cum Ente converti notavit Augustinus” (A VI 4, 1318). I have discussed elsewhere¹⁵ the fact that for Leibniz also every *vivum* is necessarily a true ens, *verum ens*, idest *unum*—a panpsychist improvement that has an Aristotelian genealogy in the *De anima* and introduces a sort of fourth transcendental. Again and again, it is possible to point out a corresponding suggestion in Suarez:

continuitatis [...] vel propter unitatem et indivisibilitatem rationis” (*Sent. Met.*, lib. 5 l. 11 n. 6)

8 A good presentation can be found in Arriaga (*Disp. I Met.*, Sectio III, subs. III, 50).

9 Aquinas, *Sent. Met.*, lib. 4 l. 2 n. 7.

10 To Des Bosses, 1706, GP II, 304.

11 *Metaphysica*, III, 3, F; *Avicenne perhypatetici philosophi: ac medicorum facile primi opera in lucem redacta*, Venetiis, her. Oct. Scoti, B. Locatellum, 1508, c. 79r; unv. Nachdr., Frankfurt a.M., Minerva, 1961.

12 *Super Sent.*, lib. 1 d. 24 q. 1 a. 3 co.

13 “Et quia omnia etiam naturalia comparantur ad intellectum divinum, sicut artificata ad artem, consequens est ut quaelibet res dicatur esse vera secundum quod habet propriam formam, secundum quam imitatur artem divinam. Nam falsum aurum est verum aurichalcum. Et hoc modo ens et verum convertuntur” (Thomas, *Exp. Peryerm.*, lib. 1 l. 3 n. 8).

14 “Ad primum ergo dicendum, quod licet ens, in quantum est ens, sit bonum, non tamen omne non ens est malum; nam non habere oculos lapidi non est malum [...] Ad secundum dicendum, quod ens et bonum convertuntur simpliciter et in quolibet genere” (Aquinas, *De malo*, q. 2 a. 5 ad 1, ad 2).

15 See my “The Organic Versus the Living in the Light of Leibniz’s Aristotelianisms”, in J.E.H. Smith, O. Nachtomy (eds.), *Machines of Nature and Corporeal Substances*, Berlin-Heidelberg-New York, Springer, 2011, pp. 81-94.

“vivens est per se unum substantiale suppositum, cuius omnes partes sunt continuae; ergo habet unam formam informantem omnes illius partes” (DM 2,8, 2).

Precisely from this unity of the form, Leibniz develops an identification of living and *unum per se*, and moreover he does so in connection to the theory of the soul—the soul as dominant monad and entelechy of the composite.

The ‘unum per se’, as we said, is always contrasted by Leibniz to the ‘unum per accidens’, on the one hand, and to the ‘unum aggregatione’, ‘per aggregationem’, on the other hand. As we read in Aquinas’ *Commentary to the Sentences*, the ‘one by accident’ is not one and the same with the essence of the one; such is instead the ‘one by its nature’¹⁶. And the union of the soul, as motive principle, and of the body, makes a *unum per se*¹⁷.

The division between a Platonic and an Aristotelian opinion on the relation of mind and body is sketched by Aquinas, again in the *Commentary to the Sentences*. “De unione animae ad corpus apud antiquos duplex fuit opinio”. Plato’s doctrine is first introduced: “Una quod anima unitur corpori sicut ens completum enti completo, ut esset in corpore sicut nauta in navi”. This is also Peter Lombard’s, the Master of the Sentences’ starting point: “secundum hanc opinionem esset verum quod Magister dicit, quod anima est persona quando est separata”. But Thomas cannot accept that the soul be united only accidentally to the body:

“Sed haec opinio non potest stare: quia sic corpus animae accidentaliter adveniret: unde hoc nomen homo, de cuius intellectu est anima et corpus, non significaret unum per se, sed per accidens; et ita non esset in genere substantiae”.

Instead, Aquinas suggests that Aristotle’s, and the Scholastics’ (‘the moderns’) doctrine is the correct one:

“Alia est opinio Aristotelis quam omnes moderni sequuntur, quod anima unitur corpori sicut forma materiae: unde anima est pars humanae naturae, et non natura quaedam per se”¹⁸.

As it is well known, Leibniz wants to have it both ways; and in some way, his doctrine of the substance is like Aristotle’s, in many ways it is not. Nevertheless, an ultimately Aristotelian conception seems to be the key both to Leibniz’s insistence on composition even in immaterial substances, and of the perpetual difficulty concerning the corporality of substances; a problem which, from a different point of view, could be considered a Platonist’s difficulty with his own Aristotelism.

But is Leibniz a real Platonist *and* a true Aristotelian? Or some lame, half-Platonic Aristotelian, a sort of double nature? Or is it all, as some might say, a bit beyond the point, in consideration of the fundamentally modern nature of Leibniz’s philosophy? Instead of a creative, or appropriative, it might be a compulsory Aristotelism: Leibniz’s difficulty in framing, from a technical point of view, his theory

16 “Non enim est unum secundum accidens unum et quod quid erat esse uni: sed est unum per se” (*Sent. Met.*, lib. 7 l. 5 n. 20).

17 “Dicendum quod ex motore et mobili non fit unum per se in quantum huiusmodi; sed ex hoc motore qui est anima et ex hoc mobili quod est corpus, fit unum per se, in quantum anima est forma corporis” (*Q. disp. de An.*, a. 9 ad 3).

18 *Super Sent.*, lib. 3 d. 5 q. 3 a. 2 co.

of the substance without resorting to Aristotelian concepts is, as we said, a symptom. Leibniz will move, let us say, from such a compelled, to an impelled Aristotelism, when he will try so hard, with the help again of Aristotelian concepts, to develop a theory of the composite substance and of *substantiata* in order to support the union of pre-established harmony, of infinitely subtle machines of nature, and of passive and active forces, that has become his system of philosophy, where unity and infinity are inextricably connected:

“Mes meditations fondamentales roulent sur deux choses, sçavoir sur l’unité, et sur l’infini. Les ames sont des unités, et les corps sont des multitudes, mais infinies” (A I 13, 90).

Maybe only in the *Monadology*, when composition will be ditched in favor of sheer harmony, will the Aristotelian bonds loosened, and unity will be freed of its own Aristotelian overload, in favor of a stricter connection with the concept that, in Leibniz’s own view, was destined to complement it.